

Astrolabes

The astrolabe was one of the most important instruments used by navigators in the fifteenth century. The word comes from the Greek *astro* (star) and *labio* (finder). Explorers used the astrolabe to plot the position of the sun, moon, and stars in relation to a given point. With an astrolabe, an explorer could determine the time of day and the latitude (distance from the equator) of his ship's position.

Medals and Decorations

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, medals were often given to explorers in recognition of bravery and service to their country. These medals usually were made of gold, silver, or brass and were attached to a decorative cloth ribbon. Sometimes the recipient of a medal was also awarded an honorary title or piece of land.

Compass

The compass was a device used to determine direction. While celestial bodies (stars, moon, and sun) were also used by explorers to determine direction, the compass allowed them to navigate on the open seas in any weather conditions. The needle of a magnetic compass always points north to the earth's magnetic pole. This shows the user the direction in which he or she is moving.

Map of the World in 1492

In the fifteenth century, maps representing the world were inaccurate. For example, maps did not show North or South America because they were unfamiliar regions. Maps also depicted the Atlantic Ocean as much smaller than its actual size. Despite their inaccuracies, these maps correctly portrayed the world as a single, round sphere.

Coins

Coins were used by Europeans for trading and banking. By the fifteenth century, there were over 500 different types of coins in use by Europeans. Coins were made from many different materials, including silver, nickel, and copper. The most valuable coins were made of gold.

Cannons

Cannons of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were made of bronze. The projectiles they fired were often cast-iron balls. Most cannons were loaded from the muzzle, or open end. Powder was poured into the weapon's barrel and rammed into a tight mass with a ramrod. Then the ball, or shot, was rammed in over the mass of powder. The powder was ignited through an opening in the breech (the end opposite of the muzzle).

Wooden Barrel

A barrel is a round container used to store drinking water, foodstuffs, and other supplies. In the fifteenth century, barrels were made of wooden staves (strips) bound together with iron or wooden hoops. The staves were bowed to make barrels wider in the middle than at the ends. This shape allowed barrels to expand as they were filled with goods.

Flag

Explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries usually carried flags or banners honoring the kings and queens who supported their expeditions. On the flags of ships sponsored by the Spanish king and queen, for example, there often appeared the letters “F,” for King Ferdinand, and “I,” for Queen Isabella. A cross was added to such flags to show that the ship was from a Christian country.

Horses

Horses were brought to the Americas from Europe by Spanish explorers at the end of the fifteenth century. Transporting horses by sea was a complicated process. Left to stand unsupported on long voyages, horses might suffer broken legs in ships on rough seas. Consequently, elaborate slings were used to keep the horses' hooves from touching the deck of the ship.

Pineapple and Corn

Unknown in Europe prior to 1492, maize, or corn, was a food consumed by peoples living in the Americas for many centuries. Corn was important because it could be eaten fresh, or dried and stored for later use. The grain was rich in nutrients and was an essential part of the diet of peoples living in arid (dry) regions of the Americas.

Pineapple was another plant native to the Americas. This sweet, juicy fruit thrived in the tropical climates of South America.

Bible

The Bible is the sacred book of Christianity and contains writings on the life and teachings of Jesus. Originally written in Hebrew and Greek, the Bible was translated into many languages, starting in the sixteenth century.

Golden Object

Many peoples of the Americas, such as the Muisca of Colombia and the Inca of Peru, developed highly advanced techniques of working with gold. They used gold to decorate temples and palaces and to make jewelry and other ornaments.